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ABSTRACT

A survey of public relations practitioners was conducted to examine the decision making roles they play in their profession. The 458 respondents provided information on their participation in policy decision making; the roles they play on the job, such as problem solver or technical services provider; and information on their decision making environment. The results supported the hypothesis that decision making at both policy and problem identification levels can be positively correlated with the role of problem solving facilitator. However, the size of the correlations decreased with lower level decision making, indicating that the problem solver's skills are in less demand for plans to carry out decisions. A negative relationship was found for policy decisions and the technical services provider, suggesting that the person who writes press releases, maintains media contacts, and edits material for the organization is less likely to be involved in the very policy decisions that determine what is released to the media. (HTH)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION

ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKING
AND PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES

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An important function of public relations is "to counsel senior officials on ways and means of maintaining or reshaping operations or communications policies to gain maximum public acceptance" (Cutlip and Center, 1978, p. 7).

Practitioners, however, bemoan that such policy planning is precisely the activity from which they have been excluded:

More often than not, the chief executive officer will no more consult with PR about a major policy matter than ask his barber for stockmarket advice (Mason, 1974, p. 121).

More recent investigations of practitioner behavior suggest that such assertions may be unfounded. Practitioners report a wide variety of staff and line functions (Cutlip and Center Survey, 1976) and roles (Smith, 1978; Broom and Smith, 1979). These investigations also suggest that the level of access to or inclusion in the policy planning or decision making process may affect the role performed by the practitioner.

This paper proposes to look at that relationship. In particular, how does participation in organizational decision making affect practitioner role behavior? The models depicting the behavior of public relations practitioners have been drawn from the role research of Broom and Smith (1979). The models, which will be discussed at length later in the paper, are labeled expert prescriber, technical services provider, communication process facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and acceptant legitimizer.

These roles have been preferred over earlier descriptions of practitioner behavior for the following reasons:

- a) the role models provide testable measures of practitioner behavior;
- b) by looking at the dimensions underlying the numerous activities in which practitioners engage rather than at the activities themselves, the role models provide fewer dependent variables and thus enhance the power of statistical analyses;
- c) the data for this paper are drawn from a 1979 national survey of public relations practitioners which measured both participation in decision making and practitioner roles.

Decision Making

One difficulty in initiating a discussion of decision making is that most references in the literature are closely related to other concepts, such as uncertainty, job satisfaction, authority, leadership, and group/organizational structure. Duncan (1972) broadly defines decision making as the gathering and processing of information that precedes and determines the behavioral response of individuals or units in the organization.

Various labels are applied to the decisions that are made, depending in general upon the magnitude of their implications. If they are repetitive and demand little thought, then they are routine everyday decisions evoking routine actions.

But if the decisions are somewhat more complex, have wider ramifications, and demand more thought and a heavier information base, then they are defined as tactical decisions. Even more complex decisions come under the classification of policy. But policy may best be remembered as critical decisions (Selznich, 1957).

It is important to recognize that this definition of policy extends the implications of the activity 'policy formation' well beyond the traditional concern for the intrinsic importance of the issues. When we focus on those strategic moves that direct an organization's resources towards perceived opportunities in a changing environment, we are at once, "concerned with (a) intellectual activities of perception, analysis and choice which are often subsumed under the rubric 'decision making,' (b) social processes of implementing policies formulated by means of social structure, systems of measurement and allocation, and systems of reward and punishment, and finally (c) the dynamic process of reversing policy as changes in the organizational resources and environment change the context of the original problem" (Baur and Gergen, 1968, p. 2).

Various models have been proposed. In their study of work organization, Pugh, Hickson, et al. (1963) describe four decision making categories in the standardization of organizational procedures: (a) decision seeking procedures; (b) decision making procedures; (c) information conveying procedures; and (d) procedures for operating or carrying out decisions. The authors state that procedures are standardized when the rules cover all circumstances and provide directions on how to proceed in cases not specifically covered. In other words, they saw the routinization of decision making as part of the standardization process.

This is similar to the rational man model created by economists proposing that the decision maker is a "maximizing animal" making optimum decisions on the assumption of perfect knowledge of all situations.

Social psychologists, in an attempt to account for the lack of perfect knowledge of all situations, suggest a different model of decision making. This model is based on a game theory in which decision makers use a probability strategy similar to that of a gambler. To account for such deficiencies as insufficient information, Oppenheim (1953) argued that decision making includes the steps of: (a) problem definition; (b) observation (including information seeking); (c) analysis; (d) decision; (e) action; and (f) responsibility bearing.

Cyert and March (1963) take a similar approach. They found that businessmen generally make decisions on the basis of established rules. The authors conclude that such decisions approximate those made in the past, and in a sense, are made according to habit. Only when existing solutions, behaviors, and available information are considered inadequate does the firm search for alternatives to adapt to environmental uncertainties. If only one alternative is generated at a time, the firm chooses the first one that satisfies its goals; if more than one alternative presents itself, a choice is made along

economic maximization rules. Grunig (1966) considered this to be an "adaptively rational system rather than an omnisciently rational system" (p. 21).

This adaptability parallels several psychological models for decision making (Lewin, 1938; Tolman, 1932). They describe motivational forces for decision making, which is seen as a function of success expectancy, the attractiveness of an outcome (valence), and utility.

In reviewing rational man and social psychological models of decision making, Grunig (1966) stresses three points: (1) the importance of habit in decision making, except in "cross-roads" choices, (2) the importance of "subjective probability," formed through conditioning and past experience, and (3) personality variables, aspirations, confidence, motivations, and valences.

Besides cognitive influences, several other factors are seen as having mediating effects in the decision making process, such as authority, leadership, group/organization structure (Lewin, Lippitt, and White, 1939; Spiro, 1958; and Pugh, Hickson, et al., 1963), and job satisfaction (Likert, 1961; Smith and Jones, 1968; Siegel and Ruh, 1973; Schuler, 1977).

Probably the most useful discussion for the operationalization of decision making comes from economic theories, which describe a process and suggest stages in making choices. To measure involvement in decision making, survey questions were developed for each step of the decision making process. These degrees of involvement were summarized as:

- (1) decision making procedures, which include analysis, such as meetings in which a decision must be made;
- (2) procedures defining the problem or alternatives, in which participants do not actually make a choice, but either offer or seek information related to alternatives; and
- (3) review of results, considered the lowest level of participation in decision making since it is after-the-fact.

The first two categories of involvement were each broken into two levels of

organizational decision making: policy decisions and procedural or program decisions.

Policy decisions were seen as a higher level of decision making for the organization than procedural or program decisions. They represent the establishment of long-range goals and short-range objectives. Setting policy suggests both formal and personal authority and a large sphere of influence.

Making program or procedural decisions, on the other hand, implies the operationalization, if you will, of policy. It is developing or standardizing a process for the fulfillment of those goal-setting decisions. Oppenheim (1953) identifies this simply as action; Pugh, Hickson, et al. (1969), call it procedures for operating or carrying out decisions.

Combining degrees of involvement in decisions with levels of decision making in the organization, we can create a broad rank-ordering of participation: (1) decision making on policies; (2) defining alternatives and identifying problems in policy making; (3) program and procedural decision making (4) determining how to implement programs and procedures and discussion of alternatives; and (5) review of results from new programs and procedures.

These five indicators of participation in decision making--policy decisions, major problem identification, program adoption, implementation, and review--will be treated as independent variables in this study.

Environmental Uncertainty

Although relevant to decision making, habit, job satisfaction, organizational structure, and authority are only parts of the larger environment, however complex or dynamic, in which decisions are made. The importance of the environment as an influence in decision making can be seen in the fact that environmental uncertainty is a recurring partner to decision making discussions in the social science literature.

Grunig (1966) observed, "A decision maker nearly always makes a decision with some risk attached or defers the decision until he has more information When incomplete knowledge is admitted, uncertainty arises The lack of complete knowledge, in essence, is what makes a decision necessary." Organizations are perceived to interact with their environments to cope with uncertainty, a lack of certain knowledge of future contingencies (Rogers and Rogers, 1976).

The importance of uncertainty in decision making suggests that level of involvement in decisions may vary across environmental situations as much or more than they would across organizations. Rather than classify the practitioner's environment by organization, or function if you will, an effort was made to categorize environments according to their character, or level of uncertainty.

Dimensions of environmental uncertainty--complexity and dynamism--take into account that someone in an organization may experience the same degree of uncertainty regardless of the organization's function, whether that is service or manufacturing. These may also include more environmental factors with which the practitioner must deal.

Organizational theorists like Emery and Trist (1965), Thompson (1967), Terreberry (1968), and Duncan (1972) have ordered the environment along two dimensions, namely simple-complex and static-dynamic. The simple-complex dimension is defined as the number of factors entering the decision making process--with more factors, the more complex the environment. The static-dynamic dimension is defined as the degree of perceived stability in these factors over time.

When crossed, the two dimensions yield four organizational environments. These are simple-static, where factors considered relevant to decision making are few and stable; simple-dynamic, where factors are few, but perceived to be

in a constant state of change; complex-static, where factors are many, but stable; and complex-dynamic, where there are many factors in a state of flux.

Duncan (1972) demonstrated empirically that those in organizations with simple-static environments experience the least amount of uncertainty while complex-dynamic environments generate the greatest uncertainty. The other two are intermediate environments, with simple-dynamic environments causing greater uncertainty than complex-static environments. Duncan concludes that the static-dynamic dimension is a more important contributor to perceptions of uncertainty than the simple-complex dimension.

Since the organization and, at a higher level, the environment may be confounding variables in the relationship between decision making and public relations practitioner roles, a general control variable was introduced using dimensions of environmental uncertainty operationalized by Acharya (1981), which are discussed later in this paper.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

What roles do public relations practitioners play in their professional lives? Smith (1978) and Broom and Smith (1979) provide five conceptually distinct role models to depict practitioner behavior. These role models, drawn largely from consulting literature, are: (a) expert prescriber; (b) technical services provider; (c) communication process facilitator; (d) problem solving process facilitator; and (e) acceptant legitimizer.

Newsom and Scott (1976) summarized the behavior of the practitioner operating in the expert prescriber role stating, "He (the practitioner) studies and researches a situation, outlines recommendations, and offers these in a formal presentation format."

The similarity of this role behavior to that of a physician diagnosing a patient's medical problem and prescribing a treatment has prompted some writers (Tilles, 1961; Schein, 1969) to call this role model a "doctor-patient"

role model. Broom and Smith (1979) operationalized the expert prescriber as an authority on both the public relations problem and the appropriate solution. A practitioner in this role assumed major responsibility for researching and defining the problem situation and for designing the reactant public relations program or solution. Others working with the practitioner (boss, peers, client) were passive recipients of his expert counsel.

Kurpius and Brubaker (1976) call the technical services provider a "provision" role. In this role, the practitioner merely provides technical skills to help others in the organization cope with a particular problem.

These technical skills include:

Graphics, photography, publication and broadcast production techniques, special events planning, production of publicity exhibits--to mention a few from a long list of public relations skills sought by people hiring or employing the practitioner (Broom and Smith, 1979).

A practitioner in this role does not attempt to either define or solve public relations problems. A reading of want ads and job descriptions confirms that most practitioners are hired to fit this role on the basis of their journalistic and publicity skills.

In the role of communication process facilitator, the practitioner acts as "go-between or information mediator" (Broom and Smith, 1979) or "interpreter and communication link" (Newsom and Scott, 1976). Cutlip and Center (1978) say that such a practitioner serves "as a central source of information about us (the organization) and as the official channel of communication between us (the organization) and the public." This role is stated to become especially crucial when there is a breakdown of communication between an organization and its publics. Hence, Walton (1969) elaborates the role as one facilitating the dialogue process by:

Refereeing the interaction process
Initiating the agenda and suggesting the foci of discussion,

Summarizing and restating the issues and principals' views,
Eliciting reactions and feedback,
Focusing attention on diagnosing conflict problems,
Prescribing discussion methods, and
Diagnosing conditions causing poor dialogue.

In fulfilling this role, the practitioner ensures that there is maximum information exchange between elements in the organization and elements in the environment, so that the parties involved have adequate information for dealing with each other and making decisions of mutual interest.

A problem-solving process facilitator helps others in the organization confront, identify, and solve their own problems through the application of a systematic problem-solving process. Schein (1969) defines process consultation as "a set of activities which help others (clients, boss, peers) in the organization to perceive, understand, and act upon process events which occur in the 'other's environment.'" This consultation process begins with the practitioner's first question and continues throughout a joint effort of diagnosis, planning, and implementation.

Based on his review of innovation and knowledge utilization literature, Havelock (1971) developed a similar conceptualization of the problem-solver's role in stating that he is:

A facilitator, a helper, objective observer, and a specialist in how to diagnose needs, how to identify resources, and how to retrieve from expert sources . . . The underlying rationale is that only the user can determine what is really useful for him.

The descriptions in the previous paragraphs show that the four role models systematically differ in the amount of input they contribute and the approach they use to help resolve problems. For the purposes of this study, the acceptant legitimizer role was not included since it neither intervenes in the relationship between the organization and its environment, nor does it provide communication skills.

As indicated in our earlier discussion, uncertainty and information's effects in both introducing and reducing that uncertainty may be significant

influences in decision making. This information perspective holds that the environment is a source of information which is widely used by decision makers for maintaining or modifying organizational structures, processes, and behaviors (Mindlin and Aldrich, 1978).

The idea of environment as information aptly describes the environment of a public relations practitioner. Cutlip and Center (1978) state that a practitioner's natural responsibility is:

To facilitate and ensure an inflow of representative opinions from the organization's constituent publics so that (management's) policies and operations may be in tune with the needs and views of these publics.

Similarly, according to Harlow (1977), an important function of the practitioner is to communicate to the organization and to management the goals of the people who constitute its publics. This would help management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change in the goals, needs, and views of these publics. Thus, in the practitioner's decision-making environment, which is of an informational nature, there are social as well as physical elements which may be external or internal to the organization.

This information is used by individuals in their decision-making behaviors which eventually determine whether an organization's structures and procedures should be maintained or modified. A main concern for researchers guided by this perspective is the certainty or uncertainty of this information and its implications for the decision behavior of individuals. Therefore, environmental uncertainty was treated as a control variable in the analysis of data on the relationship between decision making and public relations practitioner roles. A diagram of these relationships is shown in figure 1.

This discussion of decision making and public relations roles suggests the following hypotheses:

- H₁: The expert prescriber role will have a positive, significant correlation with participation in all dimensions of decision making.

- H₂: The problem solving process facilitator role will correlate positively and significantly with all dimensions of decision making participation.
- H₃: The technical services provider role will have a positive, significant correlation only with a low levels of decision making.
- H₄: The communication process facilitator will have a positive, significant correlation with decision making at the problem identification and implementation levels.

Method and Measurement

In a national survey of public relations practitioners, questionnaires were mailed to 815 randomly selected members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Four hundred and fifty eight (56%) usable questionnaires were returned. The PR role variables and decision making variables were carried on all of the questionnaires, while the uncertainty variables were carried on only half so as to accommodate other variables. Thus, the number of returned and usable questionnaires that carried the uncertainty, role, and decision making variables was 229 (56%).

Decision making was measured on five items, each representing a dimension of participation:

- (1) decisions on the adoption of new policy;
- (2) meetings with top management to discuss major problems;
- (3) meetings to decide on the adoption of new programs and/or procedures;
- (4) meetings on how to implement new programs or procedures; and
- (5) meetings in which results of new programs and/or procedures are discussed.

When asked how frequently the respondent participates in each type of behavior, the response category for each could vary on a five point scale of (1) never, (2) seldom, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always.

The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the decision making index was 0.92.

Public relations roles: Twenty-eight items on a seven point scale of (1) never to (7) always were used to measure the role variables, with seven items for each role. The items, to name a few, were:

Expert prescriber: "Because of my experience and training, others consider me to be the organization's expert in solving public relations problems."

Problem solving process facilitator: "I keep management actively involved in every phase of the public relations program."

Technical services provider: "I handle the technical aspects of producing public relations materials."

Communication process facilitator: "I keep management informed of public reaction to organizational policies, procedures, and/or actions."

Reliability coefficients for each role index were: expert prescriber, 0.92; problem solving process facilitator, 0.90; technical services provider, 0.84; and communication process facilitator, 0.79.

The highest mean score among the role indices was used to determine practitioners' dominant roles.

Environmental uncertainty: Sixteen items relevant to a public relations practitioner's decision making environment were distilled from PR texts to create an index for the simple-complex dimension. The items included, to name a few: internal publics, such as managers, staff, and union officials, external publics, such as government and consumers; and commercial intelligence factors like market position and share, and economic trends. The items were measured on a five point scale of (1) never important, (2) seldom important, (3) sometimes important, (4) often important, and (5) always important.

The same sixteen items were arranged on a five point scale of (1) never changes, (2) seldom changes, (3) sometimes changes, (4) often changes, and (5) always changes, to create an index for the static-dynamic dimension.

Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the two indices were: simple-complex dimension, 0.73; and static-dynamic dimension, 0.78.

Since mean scores on both uncertainty indices approximated a normal distribution, the median mean score was used to split the simple-complex dimension, mean scores below the median falling into the simple category, mean scores above into the complex category. Similarly, a median split was used to separate the static-dynamic dimension into static and dynamic components.

Measurement model: After public relations role scores and decision making scores were computed, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated for the four decision making dimensions on each of the four practitioner roles. Coefficients were also calculated while controlling for environmental uncertainty.

The alpha level for accepting results as significant was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, all four hypotheses were confirmed. Decision making at both policy and problem identification levels is significantly and positively correlated with the problem-solving process facilitator role (.59 and .64). These are also the highest correlation coefficients for those two dimensions on any of the roles. Decision making participation across all dimensions is also correlated significantly with three of the four roles (expert prescriber, communication process facilitator, and problem-solving process facilitator).

Although a positive significant correlation was found for implementation decision making and the technical services provider role, no relationship was found between the lower order dimension of program review and the technical services role.

Some interesting changes in the size of the correlations can be seen for the expert prescriber and problem-solving process facilitator roles. As mentioned earlier, the largest correlations were for higher order decision making dimensions and the problem-solving process facilitator. The size of the

correlations decrease, however, with lower level decision making. The lowest correlation between decision making and the problem-solving facilitator is for implementation decisions. Apparently, the skills of the problem solver are in less demand for plans to carry out decisions.

A negative relationship was found for policy decisions and the technical services provider (-.144). Although weak, it is significant. On the surface, this suggests that the person who writes press releases, maintains media contacts, and edits materials for the organization is less likely to be involved in major decisions, the very policy decisions which may decide what he releases to the media.

When controlling for environmental uncertainty, all of the relationships found under zero-order controls remained, and in many cases, the correlations became stronger (see Table 2).

Discussion

The results of this study must be interpreted with caution. Although the theorizing on the relationship between decision making and roles suggests a causal process, this analysis was confined to looking at correlation coefficients, which are measures only of association, not causation.

There may be several other factors besides environmental complexity and dynamism, such as education, age, sex, and public relations experience, which could account for much of the variance in both roles and decision making variables. All of these sources of variance must be accounted for in any attempt to determine causation.

Second, while the hypotheses were supported, the results show only a correlation between roles and degree of inclusion in decision making, rather than style of decision making.

Third, the population sampled for this study was the membership of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). According to Cutlip and Center

(1978), PRSA has 8500 members. Out of 75,000 who reported public relations as their profession in 1970, that represents only 11 percent. Considering the bias of this sample towards PRSA, we hesitate to generalize beyond typical PRSA members until these results are replicated with other samples.

Some proposals for additional analyses may be in order. Discriminate analysis may be appropriate to test the classification scheme used here for practitioner role models.

Another approach has been suggested by David Dozier (1981). In a secondary analysis, Dozier used data from this study for factor analysis to derive empirical models of organizational roles. Using factor score coefficients, weighted factor scales were developed. Based on reported behavior, Dozier suggests the following factors:

- (1) communication manager role, seen as solving problems;
- (2) communication technician role, involved in the mechanics of producing brochures, news releases, publications, photographs, and graphics;
- (3) media relations or "journalist-in-residence"; and
- (4) the communication liaison role, stressing interpersonal communication.

Dozier's empirical roles parallel closely the original conceptual role models used here with two exceptions. His results seem to combine the expert prescriber and problem-solving process facilitator, and separate the media relations specialist from the technician role. According to his results, these factor roles also tend to correspond closely to actual positions in the organizational hierarchy.

Of special interest here is the intriguing negative correlation found for the technical services provider with policy decision making. If maintaining media contacts is a separate role, what is its relationship with participation in decision making and would the same relationship found here still hold?

The communication process facilitator showed high involvement at all levels of decision making, contrary to expectations. It may be true that the public relations practitioner views the communication behavior of the facilitator as central to the public relations function rather than as a narrowly defined role or mode of behavior.

An operationalization problem should also be raised. In measuring role behaviors, whose role definitions are being used? Those of the role sender or the receiver? In this study we use the role perceptions of the receiver as indices of behavior. The question remains, however, can expectations and perceptions be readily translated into indices of behavior? If so, is it possible the receiver is responding to questions according to the role to which he aspires or actually performs? These questions indicate the need for direct measures of behavior in situ rather than after-the-fact paper-and-pencil tests.

Another interest is the role of the environment in the relationship between decision making and practitioner behavior. Decision making may be a relational variable that both influences and is influenced by the environment. Given the non-causal nature of the analysis, perhaps path analysis and other statistical techniques may demonstrate causality by showing the specific effects of environmental uncertainty on the relationship between decision making and role behavior.

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Table 1

PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR
PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING AND PUBLIC
RELATIONS PRACTITIONER ROLES*

Participation in
Decision Making

	New Policies	Major Problems	New Programs	How to Implement	Review Results
Expert Prescriber	.5438 p<.05	.6254 p<.05	.5940 p<.05	.3760 p<.05	.3280 p<.05
Technical Services Provider	-.1440 p<.05	.0363 N.S.	.0367 N.S.	.2266 p<.05	.0276 N.S.
Communication Process Facilitator	.4667 p<.05	.4826 p<.05	.5116 p<.05	.4041 p<.05	.2965 p<.05
Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	.5933 p<.05	.6405 p<.05	.4964 p<.05	.2887 p<.05	.4474 p<.05

*Sample size = 218

Table 2

PARTIAL CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS*
(controlling for complexity and dynamism)

Participation in
Decision Making

	New Policies	Major Problems	New Programs	How to Implement	Review Results
Expert Prescriber	.5614 p<.05	.6194 p<.05	.5998 p<.05	.3827 p<.05	.3284 p<.05
Technical Services Provider	-.1267 p<.05	.0485 N.S.	.0026 N.S.	.1829 p<.05	.0616 N.S.
Communication Process Facilitator	.4954 p<.05	.4975 p<.05	.5361 p<.05	.4296 ⁷ .4257 p<.05	.3042 p<.05
Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	.5898 p<.05	.6413 p<.05	.5196 p<.05	.3215 p<.05	.4626 p<.05

*Sample size = 183

PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLE

Figure 1 Relationships Between Decision Making, PR Roles, and Environmental Uncertainty

